

CAMRA

TASTING PANEL HANDBOOK

Welcome to the CAMRA tasting panel handbook containing information on the operation of the tasting panels and the responsibilities of the Panel Chair.

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1. Structure and Roles

CAMRA has operated tasting panels since 1989. Taste-trained CAMRA members taste real ales and record their characteristics on tasting cards. The data is used for:

- tasting notes for CAMRA's publications and web site
- nominations for area competitions for Champion Beer of Britain (CBoB) and Champion Winter Beer of Britain awards (CWBoB)

The information also allows style definitions to be formulated and investigations of changes in beer character.

Trained tasters are organised in local tasting panels in nine areas, each of which has a Regional Tasting Co-ordinator and up to around a dozen panels led by a Panel Chair.

The areas are:

- London/South East England
- East Anglia
- South West England (divided into Northern and Southern sub-regions)
- West Midlands
- East Midlands
- North East England/ Yorkshire
- North West England
- Scotland/Northern Ireland
- Wales

CBoB Area Co-ordinators collate nominations for area category competitions from branches and tasting panels and set up the competitions. (For more information see section 7.)

Panel Chairs

- Report to Regional Tasting Co-ordinator
- Recruit tasters and co-ordinate local activities of panel
- Collate and summarise completed tasting cards
- Use summaries to write tasting notes
- Enter tasting notes onto the Brewery Information System
- Submit panel nominations for CBoB/CWBoB area competitions
- Arrange local training

Regional Tasting Co-ordinators

- Report to National Tasting Co-ordinator
- Are members of Tasting Panels Advisory Group
- Appoint Panel Chairs and support local panel activities
- Allocate breweries to panels
- Arrange regional training

CBoB Area Co-ordinators

- Report to national CBoB Director
- Coordinate branch and tasting panel nominations for area category competitions
- Set up area category competitions to select CBoB/CWBoB finalists
- Notify national CBoB Director of finalists selected

National Tasting Co-ordinator

- Chairs Tasting Panels Advisory Group
- Reports to Technical Advisory Group and National Executive
- Co-ordinates tasting panels operation
- Oversees and validates submissions

National CBoB Director

- Reports to National Executive
- Appoints and co-ordinates CBoB Area Co-ordinators
- Co-ordinates submission of finalists for final judging
- Oversees arrangements for final judging panels

Tasting Panel Chairs and Co-ordinators have access to a directory on the Brewery Information System with contact details for all Panel Chairs, Regional and National Tasting Co-ordinators and CBoB Area Co-ordinators. Tasting Panel Chairs also add, update and remove Tasting Panel Members via the BIS.

2. Tasting Panel Operation

Panel members complete tasting cards individually whenever opportunities occur, and forward cards to the Panel Chair on a regular basis.

Panels also meet periodically for training, group tastings and standardisation sessions. Some panels arrange group tastings during branch activities, which can stimulate interest and encourage members to join.

Good tasters are not easy to find or motivate. Being a trained beer taster sounds attractive but is often difficult in the face of other branch activities, home and family life and CAMRA is very conscious of the need to encourage members to drink sensibly and healthily. Judge your members' commitment carefully. Any CAMRA member with adequate tasting abilities is eligible and it is advisable to seek a wide range of participants. Where possible, involve brewery liaison officers.

Space in the Good Beer Guide is limited and prioritised. Full tasting notes are published for cask beers available for seven consecutive months or more each year. Tastings should be planned accordingly.

At some time during the tasting year panels should, with brewery liaison officers, agree CAMRA recommendations on the use of tight sparklers for their allocated breweries, for the entry in the Good Beer Guide brewery section.

3. Training

Training in beer tasting and flavour assessment is essential so that beer flavours are identified and common terminology used for accurate descriptions of beers.

Tasters are trained to recognise standard tastes (sweet, salt, sour and bitter) and relevant aromas. Together, taste and aroma give the impression of flavour and tasters are trained to assess overall beer character as well as individual components. Group tastings are included in training sessions to ensure consistent scoring.

Taste training is conducted at a number of levels:

Local: Local training by the Panel Chair to introduce basic aspects of flavour assessment using example flavours and beers.

Regional: Regional training by the regional tasting co-ordinator. These sessions are particularly useful for standardisation of approach.

National: Occasional national sessions allow Panel Chairs and regional co-ordinators to update their knowledge, abilities, procedures and their own training activities.

Support for training is provided by the CAMRA tasting kit, which provides a variety of example beer flavours and details of activities to conduct with tasting panels. Kits can be provided for approximately £100 plus post and packing by Brewlab, phone 0191 549 9450 or e-mail: info@brewlab.co.uk

National funding may be available for kits and training by agreement with the chair of Technical Advisory Group - contact via CAMRA HQ.

A range of training courses are being developed nationally to support those involved in tasting.

4. Tasting Cards

Tastings are entered on tasting cards that record levels of the major beer flavours, descriptive comments and an overall 'score for style' used for CBoB/CWBoB nominations.

The card is available as a paper version and as an online version. The paper card has a standard format and is of pocket size (A6). A tasting procedure is printed on one side and a results pro-forma on the other. Space is also provided for taster's name, venue and date, to allow assessment of data. Cards are available from CAMRA HQ or can be downloaded for printing from the members' or volunteers' area of the CAMRA website. The online card can be accessed from <http://tasting.camra.org.uk/> or via WhatPub when logged in.

5. Tasting Procedure

- At least three samples of each beer should be assessed, preferably in different locations or on different occasions and involving as many tasters as possible. Tasting guidelines are printed on the cards.
- To ensure that we report on beer in its typical condition in trade it is important that, where possible, tasters sample beer from good quality trade outlets rather than breweries or beer festivals. Ideally, Good Beer Guide pubs should be used. For those breweries with tied estates, tied houses are preferable, as these will most closely reflect the preferred quality of beer from that brewery. However, it is realised that the huge and growing number of beers to be tasted means that breweries and beer festivals have to be used. It is acceptable to taste beer anywhere provided that the taster is sure that the beer is in good condition and as the brewer intended.
- Avoid alcohol and strong flavoured foods before tasting.
- During tasting limit beer consumption to $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ pint per sample. Taste from half- filled glasses for best results.
- Avoid smoky or food-smelling atmospheres, areas near toilets, kitchens and smokers' shelters. Do not smoke.
- Taste weaker flavoured and lower strength beers first, working upwards. The palate becomes less sensitive as the number of samples exceeds 6, so allow breaks and use fresh water and salt-free crackers between beers.
- Only record good, representative samples. Discard any showing evident faults but if a consistent fault is found over time and in a variety of outlets then this should be recorded accordingly.
- Responses should be recorded by each individual and not by consensus. Joint tastings and discussion may help in the assessment of a beer but returns should be from individual tasters.
- Complete the form **fully, encircling the applicable items and completing all blank spaces**. Blank and zero mean different things - blank means "don't know" while zero means "not detected". Original gravity and ABV should be noted as they each provide different information. The Good Beer Guide continues to provide both, but contains a limited range of beers. Tasting Panel Chairs should obtain ABV and OG from the BIS beforehand.
- Sample aroma first if possible. If the glass is too full, then do it when there is sufficient head space to shake and swirl. Note taste during drinking. Record aftertaste as that occurring between 20 seconds and up to 3 minutes after swallowing, noting changes in aftertaste (e.g. increasing bitterness or declining malt).
- Record each taste profile characteristic using the 0–4 scale (undetectable to intense) for scoring. Score body 0-5 (thin to thick)
- Enter an Overall Score for Style (0-10) in relation to the style circled above, not just whether or not it is a good beer. Is it a good/bad example **of the style?** Put aside personal beer style preferences and judge the beer on its merits. If you do not like that style of beer then do not attempt a card. Bear in mind that occasionally the style recorded in the BIS is wrong. Read the Beer Style Guidelines carefully and if you think that the style is wrong, then explain why in the Notes box and score the beer in the revised style.
- Note additional features in the Tasting Notes section. Try to add detail that the numerical values cannot show, e.g. type of fruits present. Do not simply reflect your numerical values in words - this adds nothing. Ensure that you do not contradict your numerical values in the Notes.

6. Collation and Submission of Results

Periodically, Panel Chairs collate information from completed cards. Forms for this are available on the CAMRA members' web site.

Beer profiles should be entered on the beer profile summary form (see below for more details), emailed to the National Tasting Coordinator and copied to the Regional Tasting Coordinator.

Tasting panel nominations for CBoB/CWBoB should be submitted to the CBoB Area Coordinator and copied to the National Tasting Coordinator using the CBoB and CWBoB nomination form (see section 7 for more details).

New or revised tasting notes should be added to the Brewery Information System (see below for more details).

There are separate, annually notified deadlines for CBoB/CWBoB nominations and Good Beer Guide tasting notes. Collation of average overall 'scores for style' and beer profile summaries can be done separately to meet these timescales.

The time period used for averaging profiles and styles is at the discretion of the Panel Chair, although it would be appropriate to use a shorter, more recent period for beers for which significantly changed characteristics have been identified.

Beer Profile Summaries

For each beer the average taste profile, body score and 'score for style' are calculated and entered on the 'beer profile summary' form. An Excel spreadsheet version of the form, with automated calculation of averages, is available.

The most typical impressions of colour and mouthfeel are also assessed from the descriptive entries and added to the summary.

Also added are the original gravity/ABV, number of completed cards, tasters, outlets and dates (to demonstrate eligibility for tasting notes and CBoB/CWBoB nominations), and the CBoB/CWBoB category - this is used for beer styles analysis as well as selection of CBoB/CWBoB finalists.

Tasting Notes

Panel Chairs use the profile summaries to write tasting notes, which should accurately reflect the findings of the panel by describing the beer in terms of the highest-scored features and include any recurring descriptive comments for features not indicated by the scores, for example butterscotch, citrus hop.

One of the aims of the tasting panels is to encourage high quality distinctive beers. The style of the notes should be positive but also reflect the average 'score for style'. Occasional faulted samples should be excluded from the averaging process.

To be eligible for publication, notes must be based on at least three completed cards.

Descriptions should be no more than 20 words in length for the GBG and should describe colour, aroma, taste, aftertaste, body and mouthfeel as found by the panel.

The order in which these are described should be varied to ensure variety in the style of the notes. Descriptions should not be discussed with brewery personnel; the independence of the process is paramount. Tasting Notes of unlimited length are also requested for other CAMRA uses, including beer festival programmes.

For each beer, original gravity and ABV should both be quoted for publication.

Finally, panels are asked to recommend whether tight sparklers should be used to dispense the cask beers of each brewery.

7. Selection of Champion Beer Finalists

For each judging panel at the Great British Beer Festival and National Winter Ales Festival in the Champion Beer of Britain (CBoB) and Champion Winter Beer of Britain (CWBoB) judging, one finalist is selected by a competition in each of the nine areas (see section 1).

Entrants to the Area Competitions are nominated by tasting panels and CAMRA branches. CBoB Area Coordinators collate these nominations and set up the competitions.

A list of eligible beers and categories is maintained on the Brewery Information System by Brewery Liaison Co-ordinators in liaison with Regional Tasting Co-ordinators and Tasting Panel Chairs.

To be eligible for CBoB, a cask conditioned Bitter, Best Bitter, Strong Bitter or Golden Ale must be available for 7 or more months of the year, and a cask conditioned Mild or Speciality Beer must be available for 3 or more months of the year, or else the cask conditioned beer must be one of the beer styles associated with the Winter season (Old Ales, Strong Milds, Barley Wine, Strong Old Ale, Porter or Stout). The BIS has five categories for availability: 12 months of the year; 7-11 months; 3-6 months; 1-2 months; and On Demand.

To be eligible for CBoB, the ABV and style of cask conditioned beers must conform to a set of style guidelines:

Milds: less than or equal to 4.0%; Bitters: less than or equal to 4.0%; Best Bitters: greater than 4.0% and less than 4.7%; Strong Bitters: greater than or equal to 4.7% and less than 12.5%; Golden Ales & Speciality Beers: any ABV but the ABV must be defined; Old Ales/Strong Milds: greater than 4.0% and less than or equal to 6.4%; Porters: greater than 3.0% and less than 20.0%; Stouts: greater than 3.0% and less than or equal to 12.5%; Barley Wines and Strong Old Ales: greater than 6.4% and less than 20.0%.

All bottle conditioned beers are eligible inclusion in the CBoB Competition. There are no requirements for any nominated bottle conditioned beers to be characterised in terms of beer style, ABV or availability (as is the case for cask conditioned beers), and therefore all of this information may be unknown. However, all this information is important to the production of key CAMRA publications, notably the CAMRA Good Bottled Beer Guide, and therefore BLOs are actively encouraged to ensure that full details for all bottle conditioned beers are provided.

Also excluded from consideration new brewers that have been in production for less than a specified period and beers with misleadingly promoted geographical origin or

non-cask versions misleadingly promoted using CAMRA awards.

For each beer category, tasting panels nominate the beer with their highest average overall 'score for style'. For a tasting panel nomination to be eligible, at least three tasting cards should have been completed.

Panel Chairs notify their Regional Tasting Co-ordinator of their nominations by a notified deadline coinciding with the end of the period for CAMRA-member nominations. All active panels are encouraged to submit nominations to ensure an inclusive selection process with the widest geographical spread of potential finalists.

The categories for Champion Beer of Britain (CBoB) awards are:

- Milds
- Bitters
- Best Bitters
- Strong Bitters
- Golden Ales
- Speciality Beers
- Real Ale in a Bottle

At the Great British Beer Festival, panels judge the area competition winners in each of the above categories, and two further rounds judge the winners from each panel, (excluding Real Ale in a Bottle), plus the category winners from the previous Champion Winter Beer of Britain awards, to select the overall Champion Beer of Britain.

Speciality beers are cask beers that do not fall into any of the mainstream UK cask beer styles and may include beers produced with novel ingredients such as non-hop flowers, grain other than malted barley, fruits or spices.

The categories for Champion Winter Beer of Britain (CWBoB) awards, judged at the CAMRA National Winter Ales Festival are:

- Old Ales/Strong Milds
- Porters
- Stouts
- Barley Wines/Strong Old Ales

The strength bands and the detailed definitions of characteristics which define each CAMRA style are given in the current CAMRA Beer Style Guidelines. **Tasters, Panel Chairs and Brewery Liaison Officers must be aware of and follow these Guidelines**, which do change from time to time.

Knowing beer styles is an important requirement of a Panel Chair. CAMRA's beer style guidelines are available on the tasting panel page of the CAMRA web site. Commercial beers should be judged within the styles they represent, and unjustified claims of styles should be considered, for example ordinary bitters being labelled and promoted as 'best bitters'.